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November 4, 2007

Climate change: A stitch in time

With oil running out, is it too late to save the planet? Not if we learn to mend and make do, says John-Paul Flintoff. Whether it's growing your own food, restoring a building, or revamping old clothes, the reskilling movement starts here

John Paul Flintoff

Some months ago, I got out my camcorder and set it up in the office in my loft. I put on an expensive shirt I'd bought when I worked in a proper office. It was from Thomas Pink, and it didn't fit me as well as it should. I knew that because I'd subsequently treated myself to a fitted shirt. I set the light, sound and focus, then pressed record.

"Hi, my name's John-Paul. I need some help with my shirts. They've got big necks – you can see why – and that makes them really baggy and I want to take them in."

I stopped recording, put on the fitted shirt, and started again. "I had this shirt made for me. It's the only one I've ever had made for me. It fits beautifully, but cost a fortune. How can I get another one? Can I make it myself?"

I plugged the camera into my computer and e-mailed the clip to ThreadBanger, a weekly programme broadcast on the internet by Rob Czar, a music nerd and writer, and Corinne Leigh, an environmentalist. The show is fast-paced, low-budget, and has half a million viewers. Two weeks later I got an e-mail: my clip was going into the next show. So I downloaded the episode and started watching.



Order after the storm

Fifteen million trees were torn down by the Great Storm of 1987, and in our panic to restore England's landscape, we succeeded in creating more chaos

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"Hey, what's up!" Rob began. "Welcome to ThreadBanger."

"Recently, we received this video from John-Paul," added Corinne. And there I was, twirling in my office.

Then Corinne came back onscreen. "All right, John-Paul. Altering your clothes can be hard if you're not an experienced tailor. The easiest method is pinch and pin. Take your baggy shirt, turn it inside out and put it on. Take out your pins and pinch... and pin. Once you're pinned up you're going to sew a seam up the armpit and down the sides. Try it on, see if it fits. If you're happy, trim off the excess."

At first, Threadbanger appealed to me as an opportunity to muck about instead of work. But the geek appeal diminished and soon I was obsessed with fixing my shirt. At my comprehensive school I was

obliged to submit to sewing lessons for three years. My wife, educated at grammar and private schools which focused on higher things, is hopelessly impractical, so all the minor repairs in our house are done by me. But it

seems I lack the confidence to tackle bigger jobs. In my world, it's easier


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economic system. And, I modestly submit, we must learn to make and repair our clothes.

Worldwide, we spend over \$1 trillion a year on clothes. And in the UK we dispose of 900,000 tons of clothing rubbish a year. Only a tiny portion is retrieved, including 3,500 tons collected by Traid – a charity that resells second-hand clothes through its shops in the southeast. I recently visited Traid's warehouse in Wembley and watched workers sort incoming donations by type (trousers, shirts) and by season (winter clothes or summer). "Fine sorters" looked for problems such as tearing or stains, then divided garments into two types: upmarket or less elevated. (Traid's branches tend to specialise.) Anything unsatisfactory is thrown into another pool, to be resold to rag traders. Some goes to Eastern Europe or Africa. And a small number of items are repaired or entirely reconfigured, for sale under Traid's own label, Traid Remade.

Traid's education co-ordinator, Lyla Patel, visits schools to talk about landfill, wasted resources such as water used for growing cotton, pesticides and other consequences of "fast fashion", such as sweatshops. This does not immediately reconcile all school children to the idea of wearing second-hand clothes, she says. "Some say second-hand clothes are smelly. I say, 'Don't you have a washing machine?', and say even new clothes may have been tried on many times in changing rooms. Others say, 'I'm not poor, I don't need second-hand.' I point out that second-hand clothes can be more expensive than new ones at Primark."

At the end of each event, children do customising workshops, then model their clothes on improvised catwalks. That includes boys. "Boys often use a lot of trimmings," reveals Madeleine Bates, Traid's communications manager. To further raise awareness beyond the charity-shop crowd, Traid held a clothes swap at a boutique in Knightsbridge, in partnership with Visa. It was open for four weeks: people donated clothes and got credits according to what they donated. "There was a huge swap, with queues outside from 3am," says Bates. "People were rushing to buy things like Peaches Geldof's trilby and Mischa Barton's bag."

The actress Helena Bonham Carter, who has always given friends handmade presents for birthdays and Christmas ("whether they like it or not") has teamed up with her friend, the swimwear designer Samantha Sage, to produce clothes under the label Pantaloonies, available from Harrods. Bonham Carter has frequently been derided for her eccentric fashion sense. After a 1985 Oscars appearance she explained that at the last minute she had pulled a Miss Selfridge dress from the cupboard, worn it over a skirt of her mother's, and tied a bow in the front. But that same spirit of inventive fun is what draws customers to Pantaloonies, in particular its bespoke jeans refurbishing service. A significant part of the fee goes to Unicef.

"The backlash against rampant consumerism has started," a spokesman for Liberty, the London department store, explains. "Concern about the environment has caused many young designers to explore a 'make do and mend' approach."

Could this explain why high-street fashion chains have done so badly recently? This year analysts blamed "interest rates starting to bite", but Rupert Eastell, head of retail at BDO Stoy Hayward, writing in Retail Week, recently acknowledged that this doesn't explain the "strong sales increases in non-fashion sectors".

Could it be that the City has overlooked the DIY clothing revolution? It would hardly be surprising. Clothing is regarded as too homely and bloodless to be world-changing. But a textile-based revolution has happened before. Gandhi gave up wearing western-style clothes, preferring to weave his own from thread he'd spun himself. He believed that if Indians made their own clothes, it would deal an economic blow to the British establishment in India – and he was right. The spinning wheel was later incorporated into the Indian national flag. Gandhian self-sufficiency motivates

several of the people already mentioned.

It perhaps explains my own obsession with those Thomas Pink shirts.

Alexis Rowell is a former BBC journalist who abandoned his career to train as an energy efficiency inspector and stand successfully as a Liberal Democrat councillor in Camden, north London. "I had an epiphany and decided to change my world, then change everyone else's lives too." As Camden's official eco-champion, he helped to organise the Camden Green Fair in Regent's Park this year, and took care of the fashion workshop tent. One of his best ideas came from his mother. "She'd grown up with a treadle machine. She found one on eBay and bought it for me. The tent was open from midday till 7pm. The machine was in use constantly. We had a lot of kids and adults, including a surprising number of men. There was one guy who came in with his girlfriend, very sceptical at first, but he came out wearing a T-shirt with fur trim. How cool is that!"



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Someone else has done even more than Rowell to push forward the DIY clothes revolution. [Wendy Tremayne](#) is the US founder of Swap-O-Rama-Rama, a clothing swap with DIY workshops that has spread in two years to 50 cities in the US and five other countries. Every swap begins with a huge pile of unwanted clothing contributed by the attendees – tragic shopping mistakes, well-worn and loved items that have exceeded their stay in the cupboard. It's all free: all you have to do is modify it and, if you're brave, take a spin down the catwalk.

"Swap-O-Rama-Rama helps people break down the barrier between consumer and creator," Tremayne says. "We're told that making things deprives us of leisure time. But what does one do with all that leisure time? We shop!"

Making your own clothes is not only about improving the world "out there". It's also about changing ourselves, and not only as popularised by Trinny and Susannah. Again, there's a historical model. As a young woman, Elizabeth Fry – the Quaker philanthropist who features on the £5 note – enjoyed fine clothes, including scandalously purple boots with scarlet laces. But as she became aware of the world, she decided to change the way she dressed. As a "Plain Quaker", Fry helped found the Association for the Improvement of Female Prisoners in Newgate, which provided materials for prisoners to sew and knit. Additionally, women transported to the colonies were given tools and materials to make quilts, sold on arrival to provide an income to protect them from becoming prostitutes.

If I hadn't thought of Fry already, I would certainly have done so when Lyla Patel invited me to a fashion show in Brighton, where young offenders were modelling outfits they'd made out of second-hand clothes provided by Traid. The audience comprised about 150 well-dressed customers of Brighton's smartest boutiques. The young offenders – two male, two female – modelled their clothes after the interval. They took the name Young Pretenders – a pun on their legal status – but didn't seem to know that their criminal record would be mentioned.

Standing behind the curtain, they heard the MC reveal this to the audience, to emphasise how much they have achieved in just six weeks. "That is so snide!" said one. Another's mortification was interestingly different: she was upset he told the audience their clothes are second-hand. But the show went well: the audience clapped and whooped throughout.

If four troubled teenagers could do this, what was stopping me? Why had I yet to join the DIY fashion revolution and fix my baggy shirts?

Following Rowell's example, I found a treadle-powered machine on eBay and bought it (for £8). Back home, I set it up in my sitting room, read the ancient handbook, and applied oil to squeaking parts. Now what?

The person who finally set me to work on my shirts was not Rob or Corinne on Threadbanger, or Bonham Carter, or Patel, or the Young Pretenders – nor even Gandhi or

Fry. It was a bloke who happened to come to dinner two days after I collected the machine.

I'd never met Adam before, a friend of a friend. All I knew was that he teaches art at a local comprehensive. But it turned out that he also teaches textiles, and when he saw my machine he offered to thread it. We were still mucking about when the others finished their soup. Adam revealed that he gets virtually all his clothes from second-hand shops, and customises anything: shirts, trousers, suits. He recently made a hat for himself, and when a man stopped him on the street to ask where he got it, he made another for him, too. I admitted I felt intimidated by the job of taking in my shirts. "You've got to just do it," Adam advised. "Take it apart. Have a go. If it doesn't work, try again. But just do it.

Well oiled

John-Paul Flintoff realised he and his family were consuming far too much. So he took action

Three years ago, before I first read the International Energy Agency warning that cheap oil was running out and there would be a 'supply crunch' by 2012, the Flintoff family consumed average amounts of oil, probably more.

It's difficult to say exactly how much that is, but the average person in the UK emits around 10 tonnes of CO₂ – equivalent to burning 25 to 30 barrels of oil. If your income is above average and you spend most of it – as we do – you probably burn substantially more. So that's at least 90 barrels burnt by just three of us.

Most of us have little concept of how much we use. Why should we? Our towns, cities and transport systems were not built with a view to oil running out. To reduce our oil use, I've switched to wind power for our electricity
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supply, bought an electric car, largely stopped flying, travelled by coach and bus instead of car when possible, stopped shopping in supermarkets and had local organic food delivered to my door in a reusable cardboard box.

Roughly half the oil we account for individually is burnt up on our behalf by the industries that feed consumerism or provide public services — in the form of household goods (carpets, curtains, loo seats, paint), medical products (heart valves, artificial limbs, anaesthetics, medicines), toiletries (toothpaste and brushes, deodorant, soap) — and clothes.

If we're not to deprive our children and grandchildren of similar goods, we must learn to reduce our consumption and reuse what we have. The era of hydrocarbon man is coming to a close.

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